

Irish Nationalisms and Canadian Confederation

“All the news just repeats itself,” runs a line in John Prine’s song “Hello in There.” Read Toronto’s newspapers, and you’ll find that the city loses its innocence roughly every five years. Read Canadian history books or – if you have a strong enough constitution – watch Canadian history on television, and you’ll find that Canada was “made” over and over again. Canada was made on September 13th 1759, when the impeccably dressed General James Wolfe scaled L’Anse au Foulon (with a little help from his friends) and secured Canada for the British Empire. No, scratch that. Stephen Harper assured us that it was made during the War of 1812. Or, if you’re John Ralston Saul, it was made by the Lafontaine-Baldwin alliance and responsible government in 1848. Not so, says Richard Gwyn; Sir John A Macdonald was “the man who made us.” Roll over, Sir John; Justin Trudeau told us earlier this month that Canada was born at Vimy Ridge. Wrong again; we also read that Tommy Douglas and Medicare gave Canada its distinct identity. The country has had more remakes than Star Trek.

So it goes with the marketing of Canadian history – the elevation of important events into defining moments. All this pales in comparison, though, to the World O’Celts, where ethnofillio-pietism runs amuck. Here, we have books such as *How the Scots Invented the Modern World* and, more modestly, *How the Scots Invented Canada*. Not to be outdone, the Irish have put in a claim for the Hibernian basis of all civilization, which they apparently saved during the Dark Ages.

What happens when Canadian historical boosterism meets Irish historical hyperbole? Why, this: Canadian Confederation may have made Canada, but the Fenian raids made Canadian Confederation. Ergo, the Fenian raids made Canada. Little did the Fenians who gathered by the New Brunswick border in April 1866 realize the true significance of their action: “Thanks to the intervention of the Fenians,” asserted Robert Dallison, “New Brunswick was firmly set on the path to Confederation. Without New Brunswick, there would have been no Confederation, and without Confederation there could be no modern Canada. Canada is real legacy of the Fenian crisis of 1866.” Q.E.D. Writing about the Fenian incursion into the Niagara peninsula and the subsequent battle of Ridgeway in June 1866, Gearoid O hAllmhurain, the Johnson Chair in Quebec and Canadian Irish History at Concordia University, described it – without a shred of supporting evidence – as “the Irish invasion that changed Canada forever.” And in an otherwise fine book on the battle, Peter Vronsky assured us that Ridgeway was “Canada’s Bunker Hill, down to its subtext of national identity flowering in battle-

field defeat, tempered by a common resilience to fight another day – to never surrender. When Canada was being made, Ridgeway was the battle that made Canada.” Take that, Justin Trudeau.

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I’m sitting at a bar in downtown Toronto, with the New Brunswick historian Peter Toner on my left, and Donald Creighton on my right. Toner has an Irish Catholic background; his people came from County Derry, and there were Fenians in the family. Creighton has an Irish Protestant background; his ancestors were Presbyterians from Tamlaght O’Crilly parish in County Derry. Both are gifted historians; both reflect ethnic values, assumptions and attitudes that have persisted through several generations and across three thousand miles of ocean. Toner is drinking whiskey. Creighton is drinking gin, rye and vermouth cocktails. Between sips, he is mocking the Fenians and their invasion plans. “Nothing,” he says, or rather pronounces, “nothing could have been more characteristically ‘Irish’ in the broadest, most farcical meaning of the word than the conception and execution of this great enterprise. With one or two significant exceptions, the leaders of the Fenian movement against British America were a crew of grandiloquent clowns and vainglorious incompetents.” Toner bristles, downs his glass of whiskey, and gives him chapter and verse on what the Fenians were about – trying to employ Irish Civil War veterans against the British Empire, seeking revenge for the Famine, believing they had the tacit support of the American government, hoping to trigger an Anglo-American war that would provide Fenians in Ireland with an opening for revolution. Toner is winning this one. The mood is darkening. Their grandparents could have been having the same argument.

Then Toner turns to the New Brunswick election of 1866 – the pivotal one, on which the immediate success of Confederation depended. He recounts the family stories – men drilling in the moonlight to protect themselves from loyalist attacks, the night

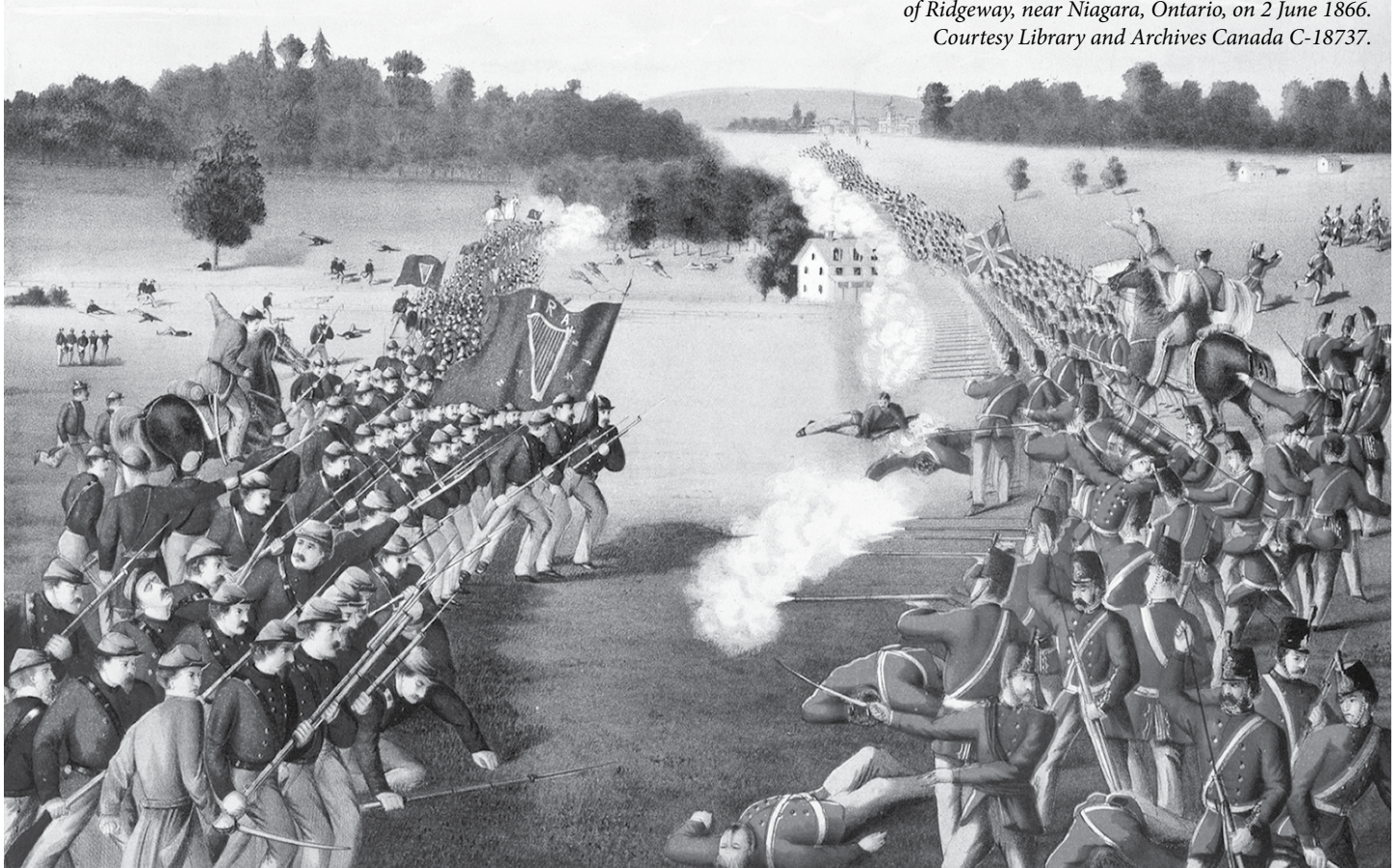
riders who showed up at the family farmhouse, looking for Toner's grand-uncle, beating up the father, giving the mother fifteen minutes to get out, burning the place down. On election day, he continues, the militia were out in force, to intimidate any Catholic who might have attempted to vote. He speaks as if all this happened just yesterday. It was the most anti-Irish Catholic election in New Brunswick's history, he says, slamming his whiskey on the counter, and it worked. By tarring Irish Catholics with the brush of Fenianism, and by playing up the Fenian scare, the Confederates carried the day. He agrees with Robert Dallison that the Fenian invasion attempt brought New Brunswick into Confederation, but there the agreement stops. The Maritimes, he says, have been paying for it ever since. He'll be damned if he celebrates the 150th this coming First of July.

Creighton rounds on him. The Anti-Confederate government in New Brunswick, he says, was an unstable compound of those who opposed Confederation because it concentrated too much power in a central government, and those who opposed it because it did not concentrate enough power in a central government. Among the former was Timothy Warren Anglin, the leading voice of Irish Catholic opposition to Confederation; among the latter was his fellow cabinet minister Robert Wilmot. During the winter of 1865-66, both men resigned from the government, and Wilmot converted to federalism. The premier himself, Albert Smith, was wavering on the issue, and the Lieutenant Governor

Arthur Gordon had been convinced since November 1865 that he could buy a union majority in the legislature. The government would have lost the election, even if the New York Fenians had never gone anywhere near New Brunswick. Haven't you read my *Road to Confederation*? he asks, his voice rising. It's all there: "Fenianism would unquestionably injure the Anti-Confederate cause; but it could not deal it a mortal blow. The movement's chief disability was caused, not by any external force, but by its own inward deterioration – by the doubts, uncertainties, and contradictions that distracted and inhibited it."

Toner looks at the whole row of glasses along the bar. We differ, he says, on which ones are half empty and half full, but you've got it ass backwards. Yes, I've read your damned book, and yes, all those things played a part, but the Fenian raid was the fatal blow to the Anti position. The tension is unbearable. I escape to the washroom, mulling it over. This time, I think that Creighton has the better of the argument, but who knows? The fact is that the Fenians did threaten New Brunswick, and that the loyalty card was played and played hard during the election. And the Anti-Confederates were hammered. But is this the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy? Or an instance of historical analysis assuming that because something actually happened in a certain way, it had to happen that way, and implicitly ruling out contingency? Time to leave them fighting it out at the bar of history, knowing that neither will concede ground to the other, and that this can never be resolved.

*The charge of the Fenians under Colonel O'Neill at the Battle of Ridgeway, near Niagara, Ontario, on 2 June 1866.
Courtesy Library and Archives Canada C-18737.*



On the question of the battle of Ridgeway, the issue is clearer. By the time John O'Neill and his thousand men crossed over from Black Rock and clobbered the Queen's Own Rifles at Ridgeway, Confederation was already a done deal as far as the United Province of Canada was concerned. True, as C.P. Stacey pointed out, the raid did heighten a sense of national feeling in Canada, and made it even more difficult for the Anti-Confederates to push back. But that's about as far as you can go – and that's not, in truth, very far at all.

But there's another, less visible Irish influence on Confederation that needs to be considered – that of constitutional Irish nationalism, in the tradition of Daniel O'Connell and the moderate wing of the Young Ireland movement.... For Irish constitutional nationalists, ... there was a natural affinity between their aspirations and Canadian realities.

So ... when we consider the effect of revolutionary Irish nationalism, in its Fenian form, on Canadian Confederation, the verdict is mixed. It doubtless helped the Confederates in New Brunswick, but it's entirely possible that the colony would have elected a pro-Confederate government even if the Fenian leaders had decided to stay at home instead. And the argument that the Ridgeway raid contributed to Confederation doesn't hold much water, as far as I can see.

But there's another, less visible Irish influence on Confederation that needs to be considered – that of constitutional Irish nationalism, in the tradition of Daniel O'Connell and the moderate wing of the Young Ireland movement. For Irish revolutionary nationalists, the republican government of the United States was the model, at least in theory. For Irish constitutional nationalists, on the other hand, there was a natural affinity between their aspirations and Canadian realities. Irish reformers had been at the forefront of the campaign for responsible government in Canada, going back to the days of Robert Thorpe and William Weekes. As Robert Fraser points out in his biography of William Warren Baldwin in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Baldwin drew on "Irish models for the question of the sovereignty of colonial legislatures." And the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, as you know, is never wrong.

But the most interesting and important figure in this respect is Thomas D'Arcy McGee, whose vision of the "new nationality" for Canada applied and adapted his earlier Young Ireland nationalism – at least in its moderate, pre-French revolutionary iteration – to British North America. Legislative autonomy



within the British Empire, pluralism and minority rights, cultural and economic nationalism, railway development, and a strong sense of destiny – all had been central components of both his early Irish and his later Canadian views. McGee was not a major player at the Charlottetown and Quebec conferences, and his admirers have elevated his contribution to Canadian Confederation, in the best "how the Irish saved civilization" tradition.

But he was important, nonetheless. McGee expressed the case for Confederation in memorable, poetic language that none of his political contemporaries could match – drawing, by the way, partly on Irish oratorical models. He did more than any other Canadian politician to publicize the cause of Confederation in the Maritimes. And he also helped to ensure that the separate school legislation for Catholics in Canada West was carried over into Confederation – a point of particular pride for him. "So far as I know," he later said, "this is the first Constitution ever given to a mixed people, in which the conscientious rights of the minority, are made the subject of formal guarantee. I shall never cease to remember with pleasure that I was the first proposer of that guarantee in the Quebec Conference; a guarantee by which we have carried the principle of equal and reciprocal toleration a step further in Canada, than it has yet been carried in any other free government – American or European."



So, what I'm suggesting is a mildly subversive revision of the relationship between Irish nationalism and Canadian Confederation, away from the sturm und drang of the bold Fenian men versus the heroes of Ridgeway, and towards something quieter and less obvious, but perhaps more influential – the transmission and transmutation of Irish constitutional nationalism into British North America, and the possibility that moderate Young Irelanders played a greater role in the making of Canada than did militant Fenians. That argument will never make it into the high schools, let alone a TV series on Canadian history. But there just might be something in it.

David A. Wilson, History Department, University of Toronto

(above, from top) Thomas Davis, chief organiser and poet of the Young Ireland movement, and Daniel O'Connell. Public Domain.